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## THE OLD ORNITHOLOGY AND THE NEW

BY ALTHEA R. SHERMAN

It seems necessary at the outset to define the two schools of ornithology to be discussed in this paper. The old school deals with ornithology: "That branch of natural science which investigates and treats of the form, structure, and habits of birds." Its members respect the derivation of the word, meaning to discourse about a bird, and call themselves "ornithologists." They abide by the definition quoted which states that ornithology is a science and that it investigates or studies birds; in other words, they do scientific work, following the rules for scientific research.

Various writers have been busy defining science in our scientific magazines, even in some newspapers. None of them get far beyond the dictionary's definition: that science is concerned with knowledge, with truth; meaning true knowledge, not mistaken notions, that all too often pass for knowledge and truth. In this connection may be quoted the words of Dr. Theodore W. Richards, our first native American to receive the Nobel prize in science. He wrote, "First and foremost I should emphasize the overwhelming importance of perfect sincerity and truth." To this he added, "And then patience, patience! Only by unremitting, persistent labour can a lasting outcome be reached." Clearly then truth and hard work are the exactions of science. Conformity to this requirement is the role for ornithologists of the old school. Their work is research, the spirit of their gatherings can be told in the words of Paul by the substitution of a single word: "For all the Athenians and the strangers which were there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing." ("About birds," are two words to be added). The old school may be divided into two classes, the professionals and the amateurs. Of the latter class William Brewster is a notable example.

The followers of the new school of ornithology far outnumber the members of the old school. They shy from using the word "ornithologists" (perhaps it is too hard for them to pronounce), and call

themselves "bird lovers"; and again they shy away from "ornithology", naming their twaddle "bird talks". They do no research work themselves, and have so slight regard for the truth about birds, that they neglect, sometimes positively refuse, to read the truths published by others. They will not take the bird magazines nor buy worthy books. One sentence fully describes them. They dabble a little in bird lore in order to gabble about birds.

The members of the new school also may be divided into two classes, the professionals and the amateurs. The professional class comprises those who are striving for fame or gain, or both; those who are panting for publicity, who imagine that they are on the road to world-wide fame by giving their "bird talks" before Women's Clubs or at gatherings of Community Clubs. As examples illustrative of this class will be taken two cases chosen from my own observations. The first place will be given to the man, who, when passing a singing bird on a telephone wire, expressed his very high appreciation of the Song Sparrow's music. When questioned, he admitted that he referred to the song of the bird on the telephone wire, and was told that it was a Dickcissel. His counterpart is found in a woman. Her story has been told once, but it so fitly illustrates this class of fame seekers that its repetition, possibly, may be pardoned. We met, and as can readily be believed I soon spoke of the exceedingly evil habits of the House Wren. She said, "I never heard of the House Wren." Following a brief description of the bird she exclaimed: "Oh, I know now what you mean! *You* call it a House Wren; I never knew that *anyone ever* called it a House Wren; *I* always call it a Jenny Wren." She is only one of the many instructors about birds who refuse to take bird magazines, who refuse also to learn the most elementary facts about birds. There are thousands of babblers like her, and how they do love to babble about birds! They are the teachers of the amateur class in the new school.

Passing now to the class who for gain lay defiling hands on the birds, quotations will be given from their writings, published in the highest class of popular magazines. The first example given was published in 1909, when magazines were paying twenty-five cents per line for poetry. One gem entitled "The Shipwrecked Sailor", reads:

"Yet he smiled  
Abandoning hope and drowning unaware,  
Till a great sea-bird, tern or ptarmigan  
Caught by the whiteness of his lonely face  
Swooped low exultantly; huge swish of wings  
Measuring his body, as he struck him once.

Thud of ribbed beak, like the call to arms  
Stirred the wounded soldier. . . .”

Since 1909, when these lines won two dollars for the author, there have been the terrible shipwrecks of the Titanic and of the Vestris from which some of the victims escaped with their lives. None of them told of suffering blood-curdling attacks from ribbed beaked birds, either tern or ptarmigan, hence we must conclude that this was a rare case of the man-eating ptarmigan going to sea.

On account of the high cost of living, poetry prices mounted to a dollar per line in 1929. The quality of the outpourings seems to be about the same. Here is a sample from a poem entitled “Home”:

“There shall be towels as fresh as the clover  
Stored on the cedar-wood shelves down the hall,  
A kitchen as white as the eggs of the plover,  
And candlestick lights for the library wall.”

Between the lines one may read a romance: The author, contemplating matrimony, plans a home; he is a modern youth and travels; he goes to Great Britain; he samples everything; he eats; he calls for plovers’ eggs and is served with the eggs of a Bantam hen. Moreover, he is served rightly.

In sharp contrast with these nature fakes there come to mind, whenever the October leaves are falling, the lines of one who must have sat at the feet of Nature, perhaps in her very lap. They were found in a scientific magazine without a taint of money about them. Quite likely the author was a college professor who did not work for money. Except a little tautology, what fault is there in them?

“The autumn leaves are falling,  
Falling, falling, everywhere.  
Some are falling through the atmosphere.  
And some are falling through the air.”

Again wonder thrills us upon reading some of the prose effusions about nature that have been accepted and published by the highest class of popular magazines. Some of these look like a big yellow cotton patch on a blue silk dress. Now and then they contain some remarkable statements relating to ornithology which may be quoted. When snow was lying deep on the ground in Vermont a writer said she saw a Rose-breasted Grosbeak on March 12. The same magazine published the story of a November blizzard in Michigan. In it we are told that in the thickness of the storm water fowl were rushing south and among them “Swallows twittered and swept low across the water.” A well-known British writer tells a story that, as a story, is an erotic, neurotic, idiotic mess, but when he lays his defaming

hands on the birds it is time for us to protest. His heroine is "twenty and loverless". She knew all the birds, she watched for the spring arrivals of cuckoo, swallow, sedge warbler, and kestrel; as they came she scattered millet for them. Her bounty halted these solely insectivorous, or flesh-eating, birds, and as they ate her millet they hopped through the lilacs and sang to her. Late one afternoon she wandered forth and met a stranger. Cupid smote both of them with his famous darts. As night deepened they sat beneath the boughs of a tree, "they heard a tiny commotion in the tree overhead; it was like the breaking of most fragile glass. He pointed through the branches to a nest. She knew what he meant; a new-born traveller was fighting his way out of the shell into the wind-swept world." What marvelous acuity of hearing had these love-lorn creatures! But their British creator evidently had failed to read Professor C. O. Whitman and to note his statement that birds' eggs do not hatch in the night, and rarely after three o'clock in the afternoon, even though the shells may be pipped; that the hatching bird has its time for sleep and like its parents it sleeps in the night.

The Reverend Dean Inge has said, "Perhaps the great struggle of the future will be between science and sentimentalism, and it is by no means certain that the right side will win." It may be that the great struggle is now taking place in regard to the birds and that the ignorant sentimentalists will seal the fate of the few birds now left to us. They comprise the vast mass of people who belong to the new school of ornithology. They are the amateurs who in their own language "*just love the birds*". They refuse to study, even to read the truth that days, months, and years of hard delving by the disciples of the old school have brought to light. To them the words, even the names, of the great leaders in ornithological science have no more meaning than they would have if quoted to a Bushman or a Hottentot. Moreover, they refuse to believe these same words, when told of them orally. By them all birds are to be loved and protected, even though they are the birds that are destroying other birds at an alarming rate.

A prolific source of information (perhaps the only source) for these amateurs of the new school seems to be the newspapers. If some of the men who supply the columns of these papers with their stories of bird life, containing "facts" unknown to scientists, have any true knowledge of birds they fail to demonstrate it. One marvels over the announcements of the results of some of their original research investigations. Among them may be mentioned the statement

that Catbirds and Brown Thrashers use mud in the construction of their nests. One of these men declares that in northeastern Iowa there has been a "ruthless slaughter of blackbirds", and he adds: "A peculiarity of this species is that the male bird comes north in the spring two weeks in advance of the female, after mating in the southland. How they find each other is one of the mysteries of bird instinct." True, indeed, the "mystery" is sufficient to hold one spellbound! But this research student of the new school of ornithology failed to tell us the name of the blackbird of his remarkable discovery, whether it is the amorous, polygamous Cowbird or that sweet singer, the Bronzed Grackle. You may be sure he emphasized the insectivorous habits of his song bird, yet he gave no hint that the "ruthless slaughter", whether of Cowbird or Bronzed Grackle, might be the means of saving hundreds of other and better insectivorous birds. There are other things besides food habits to be considered in the evaluation of birds. Some such consideration ought to have saved our birds from the introduction of their pestiferous foes, the English Sparrow and the Starling. Many years ago the Encyclopaedia Britannica under the heading "Birds" made the statement that the Starling "constantly dispossesses the Green Woodpecker." Its habits remain the same after its transplanting to America. It usurps the homes of our native woodpeckers, yet seldom is a voice raised against it. That 4,000 Starlings in Washington, D. C., and 600 in Ohio were banded, *then released*, is an offense against our woodpeckers that scarcely can be understood or forgiven.

Returning again to the choice excerpts from popular magazines for several months one of them offered numerous things new to science. The bold young man who writes these things begins by telling us about the Brown Creeper "who is a true warbler according to ornithologists" he confidently asserts. This statement was published in April, 1923. In February, 1926, another of our leading magazines shows an excellent picture of a Brown Creeper, bearing beneath it this legend, "Little Willie Woodpecker", and the text that accompanies the picture implies that under the *alias* of Willie Woodpecker the Brown Creeper is a beneficial bird. Thus it may be seen that in the short space of thirty-four months the changeling creeper metamorphosed from a warbler into a woodpecker.

Turning once more to the magazine of the bold young man, we may read of his trip taken through southern Ohio in July. He says of it: "The most conspicuous bird seen in the Ohio region was a male butcher bird or great northern shrike, along a roadside, industriously

feeding a voracious young bird of the same species." Where were all the southern Ohio ornithologists of the old school, that the noteworthy breeding of Northern Shrikes in their very midst should be left to the discovery of this young tourist? The same young man is no less interesting when he wanders into the realms of history and mammalogy. He invades my own home neighborhood, when attempting to give the origin of the name of Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin. People, having knowledge of Upper Mississippi Valley history, recall that the early French explorers found an Indian called "The Dog" living on the prairie at the mouth of the Wisconsin River and they called the locality Prairie du Chien, a name it has borne ever since. All those, having the least bit of knowledge of the prairie dog, know that the eastern boundary of its range is several hundred miles west of the Mississippi River. But our bold young man has this to say about it: "Many similar and rather absurd instances might easily be cited; notably the 'prairie dog', which, of course, isn't a 'dog' at all, but a member of the *rat* family. For that particular misnomer we probably have to thank the French settlers who so named 'Prairie du Chien' because the locality was full of 'prairie dogs' whose outward resemblance to a dog happened to be that they had four legs and a *tail*, which latter they wagged vigorously."

Time is lacking for tarrying longer with the many delightful things published by the new school of ornithology. Those quoted are treasures garnered while reading a very limited range of popular magazines. Doubtlessly wider reading would disclose thousands like them. No space for their like has ever been found in the bird magazines. Yet every week the *Literary Digest* can fill a page and the *Journal of the American Medical Association* does fill three columns with the gems that sparkle in their own special fields of knowledge.

There is no implication in the preceding pages that ornithologists of the old school never make mistakes. They would be more than supermen, if that were true. But their mistakes are not delightful and joy-giving, on the other hand they are painfully saddening. Since ornithology is a science; since the purpose of science is knowledge, truth, perfect truth, the aims of most ornithologists are to contribute to truthful, exact knowledge as far as in them lies. The purposes of science are not attained by copying old, time-worn errors, nor in neglecting to read the many truths that research workers are constantly bringing to light. The case of Professor Tweezers amply illustrates this point. He decided to publish a life history of the birds of this state, to repeat once more the many things already told

in various state histories, which have appeared in ponderous forms of one to four volumes. Since it is utterly impossible for one man to have thorough, first-hand knowledge of the habits of all the birds of one state he was obliged to draw very largely from previous publications. But to make his book salable and to give it an appearance of original research he invited aid from his neighbors, from the Sam Smiths of Hazelbush Hollow, and the Mary Joneses of Metropolisville, whose observations as quoted are no better than scores of similar ones already published. All this is according to custom and quite justifiable. It is when Tweezers publishes ancient errors, adds some of his own, and refuses to read numerous life histories, that others have published, that he becomes reprehensible. Well might he be arrested for "cruelty to animals" when he hustles callow Purple Martins out of their nest, when the duration of the nest period is but half completed, when the quills of their wing-feathers have not yet burst. His untruths about this species might more readily be pardoned if Dr. Brownesque and several others had not given him the correct data.

Professor Tweezers is not alone in his bookmaking projects, there are several other members of his family. Some of these Tweezers would refuse to change the figures you have placed on a bank check, but they do not hesitate to mutilate the correct figures you have given in a bird history. There is a certain Tweezers who showed his masculine strength by slashing off a half day from the incubation period given for one bird. It is strange that he did not show his superiority in a bolder, braver, more heroic way by slashing off a whole day. So far as respect for truth is concerned five or ten days might have been cut off with equal reason. If science seeks knowledge and truth, there ought to be protest against those Tweezers who seize upon the outcome of days, weeks, or months of hard work done by others, only to mutilate it or to turn and twist it to suit their own ignorance or prejudice.

To emphasize the injustice they do both to truth and to bird students I take one example selected from my own experience. I had made as careful study of nesting Sparrow Hawks as I could and it was published in the *Auk*. It seemed to please one of the Tweezers, the reason soon became apparent: he needed it to use in his book. He used it, giving my name and paraphrasing the whole nest history. To that no one could object, if he had not inserted a downright, inexcusable falsehood. He said that I wrote that these hawks fed their nestlings "insects". And there that lie will stand as long as the writings of this particular Tweezers shall endure. To some people this

may appear a small matter. It is not. Besides being a gratuitous untruth, it suggests a habit that is beyond credibility. Besides never seeing it done, two seasons of close study of nesting Sparrow Hawks lead me to believe that no mother hawk of this species would be willing to approach the nest carrying insect food.

The case just cited calls to mind another class of people that may be mentioned: They are "half-castes" or hybrids between the old school and the new school of ornithology. With a smattering knowledge of a few birds they are busy trying to whitewash the reputations of certain birds proved to be bad. While they deify a bird they are at great pains to damn the characters of the people who have made known its evil habits. They forget that time is long; that after them will come bird students and ornithologists who will recognize the truth and forcibly denounce the errors and untruths in which these mongrel "half-castes" delight to revel.

NATIONAL, VIA MCGREGOR, IOWA.

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## THE NESTING WRENS OF BROOKE COUNTY, WEST VIRGINIA

BY GEORGE MIKSCH SUTTON

*Illustrated with three halftone drawings by the author.*

During the past fifteen years three species of the family Troglodytidae have been known to nest in the vicinity of Bethany, Brooke County, West Virginia. The Carolina Wren (*Thryothorus ludovicianus ludovicianus*)<sup>1</sup> is certainly the most noticeable of the three because it lives the year round near towns and farms, its loud, brilliant song is to be heard at virtually all seasons, and its size and dominant personality attract attention everywhere. The summer resident House Wren (*Troglodytes aedon aedon*)<sup>1</sup> while not so widely distributed, nor actually so common, is perhaps better or more accurately known, partly because of its ready acceptance of nesting-boxes erected for it, and partly because the average person can identify "Jenny" Wren without much difficulty. The Bewick's Wren (*Thryomanes bewicki bewicki*)<sup>1</sup> is very rare, has never nested about the towns so far as I know, and is unknown among the people of the countryside where it should occur. The Bewick's Wren may be a permanent resident wherever it is found in this latitude. The fluctuation in the wren population in Brooke County has greatly interested me.

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<sup>1</sup>Specimens have been collected and compared for determination of the subspecific form.